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Ambassador Bill Richardson
United States Representative to the United Nations

Address to the 53rd Session of the UN Human Rights Commission
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Mr. Chairman:

It is a great privilege for me to be here and have the opportunity to address the UN Human Rights Commission on behalf of the United States. I am especially pleased that my first overseas speech since assuming my new position is to you here in Geneva. Human rights and respect for the fundamental dignity of people everywhere lie at the heart of the American idea -- even as they underpin the hopes and aspirations of the people of the United Nations across our planet.

Even before Thomas Jefferson proclaimed our nation's birth, inspired by the revolutionary idea that citizens were protected from the abuses of government by natural and inalienable rights, the people of the United States demanded basic rights and freedoms. They include freedom of speech, religion, assembly, the right to a fair trial and the right to petition for redress of grievances. Together these rights and freedoms were enshrined in our Bill of Rights over 200 years ago.

As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has noted, the United States "has no permanent enemies, only permanent principles. Those principles are founded in respect for law, human dignity, and freedom, not just for some, but for all people."

The United States has always believed that these rights and freedoms are universal in their application and a fundamental reflection of the hopes of people everywhere. In our own time, we have seen the veracity of these propositions -- the blessings that freedom and democracy bestow upon nations and their people, and the costs imposed and the damage caused when these fundamental principles are scorned.

If there is a defining trend in our progression towards the millennium, it is the increasing empowerment of ordinary people through democracy to shape their destiny. From Europe to Southern Africa to North East Asia, democracy has moved from aspiration to reality -- where power is assigned through the ballot box and the institutions of civil society are helping ensure transparency and accountability at every level of government. Technology is also helping to secure these advances. From the spread of independent media to the creation of millions of cybercitizens across the globe, the ability of governments to restrict the free flow of information and ideas is being steadily eroded.

At the same time, the more things seem to change, the more they sometimes stay the same. There are unfortunately, a number of regimes that have not changed at all. These governments may

appear archaic in a world that is steadily more free. But if we learned one lesson from the Cold War, it is that people who live under repression, prize liberty no less than those who already live in freedom -- despite everything their rulers may argue to the contrary. By remaining silent in the face of oppression, we betray the dreams of those who seek freedom and justice and make it immeasurably more difficult for them to attain their goals.

And one more point. The respect by governments of justice and human rights usually means a respect for the peaceful resolution of disputes. As Oscar Arias has noted, "A nation that mistreats its own citizens is more likely to mistreat its neighbors."

These are the reasons why the Human Rights Commission is of such importance. Describing the inclusion of human rights in the UN Charter, one of America's great champions of human rights, Jacob Blaustein observed: "For the first time in history, the question of human rights and the treatment of individuals has been officially recognized as being of vital international concern. That recognition is one of the great achievements that has come out of San Francisco".

This Commission, since its first sessions under the chairmanship of Eleanor Roosevelt, has always had a historic role in the fight to expand fundamental rights and fundamental freedoms to an ever larger group of nations. It is a role that has expanded and developed substantially over the years. Hard as it is to believe today, in 1947 the Commission adopted a resolution proclaiming that the UN "had no power to take any action in regard to complaints concerning human rights."

But now, in public sessions, the commission monitors, reports and works to expose abuse wherever it may occur, on every continent and in any country. The Commission investigates torture, arbitrary detention and summary execution. It uncovers religious intolerance, the misuse of law and the lack of independent judicial practices and continuing violence against women. Commission monitors, on-site in countries under scrutiny, are providing crucial information on the fate of individuals.

The result of this activity is that the Commission has built not only the moral authority but the substantive record that enables the world community to bring legitimate pressure on governments to end abusive practices. Because of your work, we are able to marshal international condemnation and public embarrassment against regimes that refuse to recognize the rights of their citizens.

And today, more than ever, millions of people look to the Commission as a megaphone for their hopes of liberty and to legitimize their dreams of freedom. At its best the Commission is not only the conscience of the nations of the world -- a

meeting place for governments and human rights advocates to highlight their concerns -- it is the forum where governments are held accountable for their human rights abuses.

Again this year, the commission must draw attention to the countries which continue to demand its scrutiny.

One is Cuba. Cuba has made a great investment of effort here at the Commission. Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, human rights are the last thing on Havana's mind at the Human Rights Commission. When it comes to visions of new and exotic "rights," Cuba is always ready. But when it comes to basic human rights -- freedom of speech or assembly, for example -- Cuba is somehow never ready.

Another perpetual disappointment to those, like us, who believe that human rights are meant for everyone, everywhere is Burma. Despite the efforts of legitimate democratic leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, the despotic rulers of that poor, beleaguered land insist that their own need for power must take precedence over the rights and choices of the Burmese people.

In Sudan, where I was able to help free three Red Cross workers this past December, the human rights situation remains extremely poor. Although both the regime and insurgent forces have committed serious abuses, government forces have been responsible for a massive and unacceptable list of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances, forced labor, slavery and the forced conscription of children, as well as the harassment, torture and arrest of their political opponents.

Human rights abuses in Iran and Iraq are all too clear from the work of this commission and its respective Rapporteurs. Recently, an Iranian foundation increased the reward for killing British author, Salman Rushdie. What action could more starkly demonstrate Iran's contempt for the international community's commitment to human rights? And Saddam Hussein's massive violations of international human rights law against the city of Irbil and its civilian population are but one recent example of the kind of brutality he unleashes on his long-suffering people. Both regimes' abuses deserve strong condemnation.

We have great concerns about human rights in other areas as well, particularly central Africa and the former Yugoslavia. We also believe that the human rights situation in China is an appropriate subject for the Commission to address.

Chinese economic growth since 1978 has been accompanied by dramatic improvements in the lives of millions of Chinese. There have also been some positive reforms in the rule of law. However China's government continues to commit widespread and well-documented human rights abuses and to severely restrict

fundamental freedoms of speech, the press, assembly, association, and religion in violation of internationally-accepted norms.

We do not seek confrontation over this issue, but we firmly believe that the PRC should be held accountable, and certainly at the United Nations Human Rights Commission, to the international standards that China itself has endorsed.

Mr. Chairman, although the agenda of this Commission is already overcrowded, and we believe strongly that item four should be dropped altogether, the United States is pleased that a new item regarding indigenous issues was added last year. As a resident of New Mexico -- a state I am proud to have represented in the American Congress for 14 years and where Native Americans have made so many contributions to the quality and richness of our life -- I look forward to an enhanced dialogue with the growing number of indigenous groups who are now represented here and elsewhere within the UN System.

The UN Human Rights Commission is now half a century old. Over time, its responsibilities have grown as more and more people have come to know that human rights are not just words the privileged live by, but that they constitute an international guarantee that our commitment is to work together for all those who seek freedom and justice.

It is our duty to be strong defenders of the weak and powerful advocates for the powerless. But as a new century fast approaches, we also need to ensure that the Commission operates as efficiently and as cost effectively as possible. We need to find better ways to provide more services directly to the people who need them and waste less time on outdated and meaningless resolutions. Many resolutions could be eliminated; others should be made biennial.

But at the same time, we must not lose sight of our mission here. More than ever, the Commission's *raison d'être* remains the same: the promotion and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Let us agree together that we will fulfill the commitments made in the UN charter, that we will uphold the standards to which this commission is dedicated, and that each of us will respect the dignity of all our people.
Thank you.